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ABSTRACT

Professional alcohol workers (alcohologists) are an essential part of the health care system in their efforts to deliver services to the alcohol abuser. Since alcohologists are involved in a high human-contact stress occupation they can be subject to burnout. Alcohologist burnout reflects a stress model in the following areas: (1) in the institutional area the alcoholic is offered fragmentary service, limited continuity of care, severely lacking specialized services, unrealistic outcomes, and conflicting objectives; (2) in the area of others, the recovering alcoholic involves contact-at-crisis point with extreme dependent need with the most complicated disease affecting a person at all levels; and (3) in regard to the self, a continual assessment of who one is and one's relationship with others, institutions, and a power greater than self. Alcohologists can and will go through burnout. For alcohologists the phases of the burnout model include: loss of personal center; negative attitude; omnipotence; and fragmentation. Burnout is a natural path of growth for alcohologists. An awareness and understanding of the positive dynamics of burnout can provide the space, nurturance, and enriching agents necessary to navigate through the process. An experience of the positive dynamics of burnout can allow alcohologists to gain a deeper sense of themselves. Attitudinal and procedural factors can effect an alcohologist's working through the burnout condition. (ABL)

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THE DYNAMICS OF BURNOUT

FOR THE ALCOHOLOGIST

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SUMMARY

The dynamics of burnout are explored as a means of natural growth for the professional Alcoholism Worker (Alcohologist). The process is presented in stages to aid in developing an understanding about what happens during the burnout process. The positive, productive aspects are presented with practical suggestions for navigating through the burnout process.

THE DYNAMICS OF BURNOUT FOR THE ALCOHOLOGIST

Raymond P. Dreitlein

Professional alcohol workers (Alcohologists) are an essential part of the health care system in their efforts to deliver services to the alcohol abuser. The dynamics that make effective workers also push them to give too much, too fast. Consequently, Alcohologists can develop a sense of emptiness, of having nothing more to give. A person in this condition is described as "burnt out". (1)

The burnout concept has been acknowledged by many high human-contact stress occupations, but little attention has been given to the burnout phenomenon by trainers, researchers, and administrators in these fields. (2,3)

Freudenberger, the first person to identify the burnout syndrome, follows a stress model and describes it as the result of "...fighting a battle on at least three fronts; we are contending with the ills of society (institutions), the needs of the people who come for help (others), and our own personality needs (self)" (1) When the balance between institutions, others, and self is offset, a person is thrown into a state of continual conflict and frustration that increases stress and leads to a sense of "burning out".

Maslach indicates that the stress of human-service workers is caused by the continual giving required for working with troubled people. Armed with little understanding of what is happening to them, these professionals are often unable to cope. The result is burnout. (2)

Ginsburg approaches burnout from a managerial prospective and concludes that it is "...a significant management disease". (4) Mitchell takes a similar view, and writes that "No one can function long in a helping profession without feeling its (burnout) impact". (5)

The term "burnout" is graphic, but little agreement exists on its definition. Burnout has been presented as a "disease", a "syndrome", a "reaction", a "battle", and a "storm". Overall, when burnout is described, it reflects an aura of negativity. (1,2,3,4,5)

The following is a working definition of burnout: Burnout is a progressive process (not static or fixed) of the depletion of resources (physical, social, psychological, mental, and spiritual) through the inordinate consumption of energy with a resulting sense of exhaustion, feeling scattered, excessively worn, weak, and debilitated. In addition, burnout includes increasing experiences of frustration (baffled, defeated, thwarted) and conflict

(collision of incompatible drives and motives). Burnout does not appear to be a reaction to any single cause or situation. Instead, burnout appears to reflect the process of giving too much, too fast. The result is a sense of emptiness, of having nothing more to give. Burnout also causes a general withdrawal and a sense of decline in the meaningfulness of one's work, relationships, and life. (1,2,3,4,5).

The dynamics of burnout reflect a behavioral stress model. The focus is upon the balance (coping) that is maintained under the pressure and strain (stress) that is exerted internally (self) and externally (others, institutions). A rough, but sensitive, indicator of a person's success or failure is how he or she balances these elements to avoid frustration and conflict. The goal is to maintain a relatively steady state (homeostasis) under these pressures that minimizes frustration and conflict, and enhances adjustment and continued growth. (6,7)

Alcohologist burnout reflects a stress model in the following areas:

Institutions: The alcoholic is offered fragmentary service, limited continuity of care, severely lacking specialized services, unrealistic outcomes, and conflicting objectives.

Others: The recovering alcoholic -- the most complicated disease known affecting a person on all levels of functioning (intellectual, physical, social, psychological, spiritual) -- contact-at-crisis point with extreme need (dependent), continually taking and demanding.

Self: A continual assessment of who one is and one's relationship with others, institutions, and a power greater than self, in an atmosphere of giving and helping others.

The balance in these areas is often offset, which increases stress. In an attempt to deal with this stress, some Alcohologists invest their energy to compensate for institutional shortcomings through personal encounters, sometimes sacrificing the needs of others for smooth system functioning, and letting personal growth be shaped by forces beyond themselves. As a result, they feel scattered and worn out. As they become exhausted, they appear to "...lose all concern, all emotional feeling for the persons they work with and come to treat them in a detached or even dehumanized way". (2)

The dynamics that make the Alcohologist an effective rehabilitation worker also enhance burnout. These dynamics include the helper/healer role, a warm sensitive style of being, endless giving of self, affirmation, urgency and

last-ditch effort, high grading and self sacrificing, and pioneering effort.

Alcohologists epitomize the role of helper/healer. Their job is to aid the alcoholic in the process of becoming whole, to begin a recovery from the disease of alcoholism. Alcohologists are pioneers with all the uncertainty of exploring a new area -- addiction. The essence of urgency, last-ditch effort, and similar personal experience can push them toward an increase over-commitment that is reinforced by self-sacrificing and high grading (giving only the best). A warm, sensitive style of being is enhanced by the fallacy that they can feed everyone, that they can freely reach out and affirm others -- regardless of actual behavior. These characteristics lead Alcohologists to the point where they give too much, too fast. They begin to sense a general weakness, fragmentation, and emptiness. Next, they enter a state similar to shock, accompanied by bewilderment and uncertainty, where they become frozen by a total lack of understanding of what is happening. Intensive introspection fails to uncover anthing wrong; it usually only confirms the rightness of what one is doing, which deepens the shock. Dedication to the work role is scrutinized. Frustration and conflict appear at the slightest provocation.

In the process of burnout, Alcohologists often reject the natural slide to anger, hurt, guilt, and depression.

They push these feelings beyond reach, but cannot escape them. As a result, they become victims filled with a sense of unfairness and helplessnes that weaves its way through all encounters. Anger begins to express itself through judgementalism, criticism, and sarcasm. Hurt is expressed in the form of withdrawal. Guilt is expressed through explaining, justifying, and defending. Depression is expressed in either overactivity or inertia. ACOA and/or unresolved recovery issues can surface and begin to direct a person's life.

As the process continues, Alcohologists become confused and unable to cope with the continual drain of contact with people. Often, they seek detachment. Doubt, uncertainty, and conflict rush forward, causing deeper shock and greater frustration. The ability to cope is strained. A great deal of energy is expended as attempts to balance and compensate begin to fail. Finally, Alcohologists become "excessively worn" with a deeper sense of having burnt out.

Alcohologists can and will go through burnout. Burnout is essential to the dynamics of being a helper/healer, endless affirmation and self-sacrificing, constant high grading fired by a last-ditch urgency, and the pioneering effort that Alcohologists make to give too much, too fast. In addition, the tremendous demands, extreme needs, and continual taking of recovering alcoholics ehances burnout.

Alcohologists often summarize their feelings of burnout in comments such as "I was completely drained; I just didn't have anymore to give". This explanation is often followed by embarrassment about "running out" of one's resources and not having a limitless supply to give -- quickly followed by bewilderment and increased uncertainty. The natural sense of panic, coupled with a vacilation between anger, fear, and hurt, is quickly repressed. The result is a sense that something has been lost and cannot be found. At this point, Alcohologists feel all alone in burnout; they are in acute pain and unaware of what has happened. Often, the response is to change jobs, states, spouses, sponsors, or "something" in a desperate attempt to ease the hurt that reflects the cumulative pain of the burnout process.

Burnout does not follow any calendar; a person can burn out in a few days, even hours. In fact, volunteer staffs at rock concerts have burned out in several hours of intensive work. (1)

The burnout process of Alcohologists can be presented in at least four general phases. This sequence is tentative; the order is not a step-by-step process as much as it is a flow of the elements that lubricate and feed the burnout process. The phases of burnout seem to follow a pattern that reflects the loss of a personal center, a negative attitude, omnipotence, and fragmentation.

The four phases of burnout include:

1. Loss of Personal Center

- Self coubt
- Unclear motivation
- Vague sense that something is wrong
- Physical exhaustion and fatigue; tension
- Overcompensation at work
- Mood swings

2. Negative Attitude

- Boredom with job
- Instantaneous irritation and anger
- Depression
- Feelings of overburden with suspicion
- Competitiveness
- Constant need for positive reinforcement
- Physical agitation (nervous, jumpy)
- Inability to shake a cold, flu, virus

3. Omnipotence

- Hostility toward questioning of judgement
- Rigidity, inflexibility
- Projection on others of difficulty
- Strong denial that anything is wrong
- Physical weakness, fatigue, shortness of breath
- Fight or flight symptoms

4. Fragmentation

- Words oppose behavior
- Easily hurt
- Disorganized, unpredictable responses
- Sense of floundering and being wrong -- lost
- Physical "running away", sick days, leaving others to "fill in"
- Cyclical behavior
- Tenuous stability

A certain view of the phases of burnout can imply that people blaze intensely and exhaust all available material, leaving the remains charred and lifeless. But this "match theory" emphasizes only the destructive, painful effects,

which suggests that burnout should be avoided at all costs. Many professional workshops focus on avoiding burnout, rather than dealing with it, leaving most attendees deeply confused with greater guilt.

Pain is positive. Pain tells us about ourselves; it tells us that we must change our lives and that we must grow. This message can be a fierce enemy or a welcome friend, depending on our position. According to Malzack, "Pain is a highly personal experience that is unique to each individual". (8) Pain is not a fixed entity, but part of the growth continuum; it is part of the burnout process.

The pain of burnout is parallel to a forest fire. Within the specific dynamics of the destruction, seeds are germinated, minerals are exposed, and nutrients are released into the soil. The fire is destructive in that it clears away completed material; it is productive in that it releases new elements that did not exist before. The balance that has been reached ceases to be a growth medium and can only maintain the same type of experience. (A pine forest produces only pine trees.) Similarly, human growth searches for variety -- different, new, and deeper experiences.

When people reach a point within themselves that is not conducive to change, they can be described as being

"climaxed". Burnout clears away climaxed, completed material that produces only sameness for new growth. The destruction of the climaxed, cumulative layer creates a void that can be filled only by a deeper movement into self. This movement into a newer awareness of self -- of getting in touch with deeper levels of being -- is called the growth process. Burnout facilitates and enhances this process.

Burnout is a path of tremendous growth for Alcohologists. It is a natural phenomena that embraces destructive and productive processes in a delicate balance. The result is change and new life. If burnout did not occur, then growth would most probably not occur to the same depth or degree; there would be no new awareness, only ongoing sameness. The pain of the burnout process confirms its importance to growth and development; the unbearability occurs through total confusion about what is happening. "Openness to one's own pain appears to be necessary for growth". (9)

In burnout, it is critical to stay with it, get in touch with it, go through it; never deny it. "Rather than try to change, stop, or avoid something that you don't like in yourself, it is much more effective to stay with it, and

become more deeply aware of it. When you really get in touch with your own experiencing, you will find that change takes place by itself, without your effort and planning". (10)

Burnout is a natural path of growth for Alcohologists. It is an inevitable journey for those who are pushed by the dynamics that make them effective in their job toward giving too much too fast, not having any more to give, and feeling empty and scattered. The pain of burnout reflects the centrality of these dynamics. At the core of the pain, one can transcend (through understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness) the destructive elements and enhance the productive elements of the burnout process. Burnout needs to be accepted as a vital step in the growth continuum -- a natural path for the realization of deeper potential.

An awareness and understanding of the positive dynamics of burnout can provide the space, nurturance, and enriching agents necessary to navigate through the process. The pain yeilds to relief. We are not left burned out and lifeless ("match theory"), but filled with a deeper amount of energy and creative activity. A sense of well-being and peace is typical of those who have gone through a difficult, but essential, experience. Thoughts become quieter, clearer, and in union with feelings. Newer, usually simpler, emotional states are experienced, and an overall calmness

has a positive affect on everyday life. Alternate views of reality are welcomed. We enter a state of seeking newness and expansion rather than sameness, and embrace an attitude that the universe is comprehensible and that the inner journey has deep order and meaning. Physical senses seem sharper, and we are able to relate to the most varied and diverse people with an almost continual positive sense.

As we experience the positive dynamics of burnout, we gain a deeper sense of ourselves. As a result, we have a new ability to be nicer to ourselves. We become more clear about our wants and needs that will continue to help us grow. Old, non-growth relationships are terminated or not supported, as we seek out healthier growth mediums. The productive elements of burnout reach far beyond the destructive elements. "I was happy, joyful, delighted at being alive. I was excited and bursting with energy -- physical and emotional". (9)

The management and navigation of the burnout process is a critical (yet neglected) area in the human contact profession. The neglection is enhanced by the fact that there is no immunity against future burnout. Mitchell reflects, "One result that burnout does not produce, unfortunately, is immunization for burnout in the future". (5) The following prescriptions for navigating through

burnout are broken into two areas: attitudinal and procedural.

Attitudinal

1. Burnout happens to people, not jobs; it is not a reaction to only one cause or situation.

2. Burnout is a natural phenomenon that reflects giving too much, too fast, from people who are dedicated, sensitive, involved, and committed.

3. The process of growth is an inward, deepening journey; burnout is a significant, natural step in this process.

4. The acceptance of burnout as a means of growth, regardless of pain, is associated with the process.

Procedural

1. The symptoms experienced in burnout are real to the person experiencing them -- feeling scattered, excessively weak, worn, and debilitated.

2. A person is most vulnerable during burnout; if nurtured through burnout, a person can deepen trust of others or begin to trust.

3. The most typical reaction is to withdraw, go inward -- protective position.

4. Support, comfort, and understanding about what is happening is necessary; people experiencing burnout should not be torn down or embarrassed. They are in pain, and can be scarred and deeply hurt. The emotional and mental exhaustion of burnout is laced with a triad of grief, hurt, and anger -- garnished with guilt and impatience about the human condition. Dedicated, involved, sensitive, and committed people do not want to burn out.

5. Time away from work should be granted sparingly, with the knowledge that it is given to support a person through burnout, not as a disciplinary move for poor performance. The emphasis should be on providing space, time, and nutrients for the person in burnout. The person should be welcomed back to

work with the positive expectancy of newness and greater vigor.

6. Physical exercise should be encouraged, but introduced slowly, with a focus on walking and seeing surroundings. Most people in burnout have no physical activity that they enjoy and need encouragement to begin to energize their system through slow, steady exercise. Walking in a wooded area removed from "common noise" is an excellent form of exercise. If a person has a preoccupation with physical activity (jogging, yoga, etc.), then balance should be encouraged.

7. Encourage people to form "burnout teams" -- groups of two to three people who agree to share, assist, nurture, and stand by each other during the burnout process. Burnout teams should follow the following rules:

   A. Burnout can and will happen.

   B. Feel comfortable with and like each other.

   C. Mix similar jobs, age, education level.

   D. Meet out of the work setting.

   E. Encourage regular contact with each other.

   F. Be honest and open with others.

   G. Accept and trust others.

   H. Share with others.

   I. Place limits on self; treat limits with respect.

   J. Set aside time for yourself and use it.

A key element of burnout is to develop an understanding and acceptance of what is happening. The knowledge that this is the result of the very dynamics that make us good and effective workers can greatly relieve the pressure of the negative, painful aspects. As a result, we can

successfully navigate the burnout process and gain a deeper, richer awareness. This knowledge can aid the smooth flow of change that is necessary for continued growth to occur.

"Since the development of life means the use and growth of consciousness, that development could not continue indefinitely along its own line without a transformation in depth; like all great developments in the world, life had to become different in order to remain itself". (11)

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